DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 217 EC 307 910

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TITLE	Mental Health Issues on Campus: A Resource Kit for Students.
INSTITUTION	National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Leabrook (Australia).
SPONS AGENCY	Australian National Training Authority, Brisbane.
ISBN	ISBN-0-87397-560-X
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	53p.; For the Resource Kit for Staff, see EC 307 910.
AVAILABLE FROM	NCVER Ltd, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 252 Kensingston Rd., Leabrook, South Australia 5068, PO Box 115, Kensington Park, SA 5068; Tel: 08 8333 8416; e-mail: orderit@ncver.edu.au; Web site: http://www.ncver.edu.au ($40 Australian plus $10 Australian overseas airmail postage and handling).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Accommodations (Disabilities); Access to Education; College Choice; College Students; Drug Therapy; Foreign Countries; Interpersonal Communication; *Mental Disorders; Postsecondary Education; *Self Advocacy; Self Disclosure (Individuals); *Self Management; Student Personnel Services; *Student Rights; *Study Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*Australia

ABSTRACT

This resource kit provides information intended to assist Australian college students with psychiatric disabilities in understanding the effects of mental health issues on learning in the context of post-secondary education. The guide suggests a range of compensatory strategies that aim to optimize learning outcomes for students and considers how institutions are best able to meet the needs of this group of students. The suggestions and strategies are the result of an Australia-wide research project that investigated the learning support needs of students with psychiatric disabilities. The kit is divided into the following sections: (1) mental health issues and study success (the impact of mental health impairment on study, disclosure, assessment and documentation, and student rights); (2) student self-management (establishing clear goals, treatment on and off campus, medication and side effects, relating to people on campus, self-advocacy, and home environment and basic study needs); and (3) the educational journey (readiness to study, finding and applying for the right campus, using student services on campus, enrollment, learning skills and study strategies, managing gaps in attendance, going on fieldwork placements, and job searches). (CR)

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mental health resource kit

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Mental health issues on campus

A resource kit for students

A University of Melbourne –TAFE Collaboration project funded by NCVER

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General Manager, Equity and Learning Programs, University of Melbourne

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian National Training Authority

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resource kit

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ACN 007 967 311
ISBN 0 87397 560 X
TD/TNC 59.11

Published by
NCVER Ltd
252 Kensington Road, Leabrook South Australia 5068
PO Box 115, Kensington Park SA 5068

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Section 1

Mental health issues and study success

Mental health issues and study success

THIS GUIDE HAS been written for students who are studying, or intend studying at TAFE (technical and further education institution), university or college and who have experienced a mental health disorder or impairment. The materials in this resource kit bring together the experiences of many students and staff. The kit aims to improve students' chances of success in tertiary study through the use of a wide range of learning and support strategies.

All students bring to any study experience their own individual skills and learning needs, and not all of the advice in this guide will suit you. But, from the range of strategies, ideas and experiences presented in this guide, we invite you to take what you find to be useful. Some of the ideas will be familiar to you, some you may have come to after trial and error, but whatever your course, wherever you are studying, we hope this guide will help you achieve your goals.

Study success and mental health impairments

Almost all students experience stress, motivation problems and concentration lapses at some stage of their late secondary or tertiary study career (study is, in its nature, a stressful occupation). Not all of these students are experiencing a mental health impairment and, conversely, not all of those who have a diagnosed mental disorder find it negatively impacts on their ability to study.

The following conditions are included in the term *mental health impairments*.

- mood-related (depression, bi-polar)
- anxiety-related (phobias, panic, generalised anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive)
- adjustment-related (e.g. following a stressful change)
- development-related (e.g. attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, attention deficit disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, learning disability)
- eating (anorexia nervosa, bulimia)
- psychoses (early psychosis, schizophrenia)
- substance-related (alcohol, drug, toxin)
- impulse control (gambling, conduct)
- dissociative and cognitive-related
- sleep-related
- personality disorders
- gender identity disorders

Q **Am I the only student here with a mental health condition?**

A *You are not alone; statistics indicate that one in five of all people will have a mental health condition in any one year.*

Does having a mental health condition affect learning?

You are the best judge of that.

- ❑ Are you thinking a lot about personal issues?
- ❑ Have you noticed that study is more difficult lately?
- ❑ Do you find it hard to concentrate?
- ❑ Have you found you seem to take twice as long to understand the material as you used to?
- ❑ Is your memory failing?
- ❑ Is coming to campus getting extremely stressful?
- ❑ Do you lack confidence to start a new subject?
- ❑ Do you find it hard to be organised or motivated?
- ❑ Are you missing many classes?
- ❑ Do you find it hard to talk with other students or staff?
- ❑ Do you get very emotional at times?
- ❑ Do you have any medication side effects?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, your mental disorder may be affecting your ability to study effectively.

Your options are to:

- say nothing and risk getting lower marks
- say a little and perhaps receive special consideration
- disclose your condition to the counsellor or disability officer and request additional assistance to meet your needs. You can control the level of confidentiality to other staff.

The impact of mental health impairments on study

Mental health impairments affect functioning in studies in many different ways.

Some of these become immediately apparent, while others emerge after some time or in specific situations. It's important to note that for some students, there are no (or minimal) negative effects on study.

Understanding how your studies are affected by your illness will help you request the most appropriate accommodations and adjustments you need to overcome those impairments. A good understanding of the impact of your condition or illness on study will also make it easier to negotiate support with staff at your college.

What functions might be impaired by mental health issues?

Mental health issues can affect the following functions:

- planning and organisation
- concentration and consciousness (e.g. sleepiness, difficulty focussing)
- cognition (thinking, memory)
- perception (e.g. blurred vision, hearing voices, altered perception of reality)
- emotions (fear, sadness, anger, panic, distress, etc.)
- psychological functions (insight, self-esteem, motivation, resilience to stress, judgement)
- behaviour (e.g. overactive, repetitive, self-harming)
- interacting with others (e.g. avoiding, misunderstanding, vulnerable)
- physiology/body (e.g. restlessness, low stamina)

What aspects of study may be affected by mental health issues?

Mental health impacts on individuals in different ways, but the following effects are particularly important for students:

- poor concentration when studying or in class
- difficulty maintaining motivation
- not having enough confidence as a student
- not remembering things well enough
- being very anxious about exams
- lower attendance
- not being able to communicate very well
- structuring and writing essays
- not feeling safe and comfortable on campus
- relating to other students or staff
- problem-solving difficulties
- hard to get organised
- not being able to express needs sufficiently
- 'stressing out'
- not always able to 'keep it together' and stick to goals
- difficulty meeting deadlines

Possible long-term effects of mental health impairments on study

Mental health impairments can be long or short-term. Long-term effects include:

- delayed or incomplete learning
- re-enrolment and financial difficulties
- feeling of frustration or distress
- low self-esteem
- social difficulties
- dropping out

Possible solutions:

- get the best treatment you can (including medication if necessary)
- make the most of support from friends or family
- consider disclosing your mental health impairment to disability support staff or a counsellor
- consider making a request for accommodations or special consideration

What accommodations/adjustments may be possible?

The accommodations or adjustments a college can make will depend both on your individual needs, and on the nature of support available at your TAFE, other VET provider or university. A better understanding of the impact of your impairment or illness on study—and some careful thought—will assist you to negotiate your specific needs. Here are some accommodations (or course adjustments) that other students have found useful.

- pre-course counselling
- waiving attendance requirements
- extended course completion time
- extended examination time or sitting exam in alternative location
- alternative examination (such as an oral exam)
- notetaking or taping of lectures
- additional subject tutoring
- [illegible] counselling
- co-ordinator to case manage your needs
- skills training, e.g. study skills, time management, problem solving, memory
- assistance with application and selection processes
- class rules and administrative variations (e.g. more frequent breaks, priority queuing)
- quiet retreat area

- alternative topics or formats
- technology aids (e.g. computer software, hardware, calculators, tape recorders)
- alternatives to live group task requirements
- peer support programs
- bridging programs in study skills

Why be a student? Respect and recovery

Being a student is a tremendous opportunity to develop and achieve in the educational world. Learning and gaining recognition for skills in a particular field can bring personal satisfaction as well as entry to the working world, leading to greater self-esteem and financial independence. By choosing to study and invest effort and resources into learning, you are taking up the role of being a student. This is a positive sign that you are participating in the world and are ready to do, give or share. As one student put it: 'I have something to offer and I want to make a contribution.'

Students with mental health impairments may have strengths such as heightened sensitivity to emotional and interpersonal issues, greater creativity, and innovative ideas. Students with mental health issues expect to be treated as people first and foremost, people with diverse needs.

The recovery process

As you are probably very aware, your mental health may fluctuate over time, and recovery may take time and occur in many ways. Some experiences on campus may be positive, while others may be a challenge.

Sometimes it helps to express your insight as to how you are, with comments such as:

I am putting a lot of effort into coping with . . . but still have trouble with . . .

I am really committed to studying hard, but sometimes have difficulty in . . .

I have had to overcome . . . and this is the best I can do in the circumstances.

I am managing to do well despite my illness and this is a pretty good achievement.

Sharing with people who are truly understanding, supportive and resourceful is one of the secrets of recovery and ongoing mental and emotional health. Finding such people is essential, as is 'letting go' of

people who are not supportive. Recovery can and does happen in the educational context, with the right sort of support.

Support may be available from:

- counsellor
- disability support staff
- learning skills advisor
- an understanding course co-ordinator
- an understanding teacher
- a peer support program

Disclosure: Why and how?

We come to the sensitive issue of whether to disclose or not to disclose a mental health issue to the educational institution. Because of fears of stigma or discrimination, some students choose not to disclose, or declare, their mental health issues. The term 'disclosure' just means 'let others know about' your mental health issue.

Q **So, why consider disclosure?**

A *Advantages of disclosing a mental health impairment include:*

- ✔ *you can obtain access to services such as accommodations, adjustments to course, facilities and services*
- ✔ *you should be better understood and accepted*
- ✔ *you could get more emotional support*
- ✔ *staff could show greater interest, care, follow-up*
- ✔ *easier for staff to act appropriately in difficult situations*
- ✔ *clear 'rights' of non-discrimination*
- ✔ *not seen as 'difficult' student*
- ✔ *can get advocacy or receive support to advocate for self*

Students who have chosen to disclose, give reasons such as:

- It's a mitigating circumstance for problems.
- I might as well make use of available support.
- I want people to understand when I'm not myself.
- I think I'll get better support and understanding.
- To be understood better.
- I'd rather be open.
- To receive more understanding, especially with deadlines.
- Sharing the problem relieves anxiety.
- I find help in exams useful, I sit them in a room by myself.
- We need all the help we can get!

- I think it's a way to help people understand mental illness.
- I want to pass and I see this as a fallback position.
- If anything goes wrong, staff need to know who to contact.

It is a far from perfect world and colleges are, in many ways, microcosms of the societies they are part of. Disclosure has not always resulted in increased understanding, nor have students always received the support they felt entitled too.

Some of the issues which lead to a less than perfect result from disclosure include:

- some students feel embarrassed at disclosing mental health impairment
- fearful of staff's reaction, potential discrimination or stigma
- confidentiality limits being ignored
- wrong or unnecessary assumptions about effects of mental health conditions
- staff's fear or uncertainty on how to interact
- staff having lower expectations
- other students not being understood or being envious of accommodations

Here are some comments of students who have disclosed and regretted it:

- The benefits were not worth the cost!
- Most teachers don't understand and don't appreciate the effects of my illness.
- Some staff don't always respect confidentiality.
- Some teachers felt obliged to make decisions for me and treated me differently.
- I was harassed by some students and most don't really understand.
- It leads to stigma.
- I only met with misunderstanding.
- You'll be treated differently.

Despite the potential problems, many students still opt to disclose. As one student said:

> *I could say nothing about my illness, but that doesn't help me, because I need some conditions in the course modified, and asking for that without disclosure is more difficult, otherwise teachers see it as privileges.*

Another reason for disclosure is that your campus counsellor may be able to provide some supportive secondary (or adjunct) treatment with agreement from your treating specialist. Other possible benefits include: rehabilitative counselling, educational and personal support, or stress management relating to issues with study and being on campus.

Whether to disclose depends on how essential your privacy is, how well you are, whether you could do with some adjustments to the course or

services, and how clearly you communicate your wishes regarding the level of confidentiality that you require, depending on the circumstances and the people involved. Because you may be able to limit the confidentiality to one or two persons, you may feel reasonably safe and claim the benefits.

Some circumstances where disclosure may be appropriate:

Here are some circumstances when it might be useful to disclose:

- ❑ If you are going to have difficulties in attending classes (or coming very late).
- ❑ If you have tried to study before and have not performed well.
- ❑ If you need alternate assessment or other adjustments to the course, facilities or services.
- ❑ If there are very obvious signs of stress, mental health issue or side effects of the medication.
- ❑ If you have serious difficulties in communicating or interacting with others.
- ❑ If you get very emotional or distressed.
- ❑ If you have difficulties in concentrating, thinking, remembering or learning.
- ❑ If you have difficulties in staying 'together' most of the time.
- ❑ If your level of energy or the way you behave on campus is different and you fear you may not be accepted.
- ❑ If there is a risk to your safety.
- ❑ If there is a risk to other's safety.
- ❑ If you are going on excursions and have to fill out indemnity forms.
- ❑ If you'll need a medium to high level of support.
- ❑ If you would like to prevent or avoid some circumstances or events related to your state of mental health.

Procedure for disclosure

The process for disclosing may vary a bit in different institutions but disclosing will generally involve the following procedure:

- Make an appointment with the appropriate staff (usually the disability liaison officer/special needs co-ordinator is able to access funding and organise/negotiate accommodations, but you may prefer to disclose to the college counsellor). You may first wish to meet some of the staff for another reason, e.g. vocational counselling, or enquiry on behalf of a friend to get a feel for the person and whether you feel comfortable enough to disclose more fully.
- Some places may have a specialist worker such as a psychiatric disability teacher/consultant or a specialist student support

worker or case manager, who should have a high level of knowledge or experience in assisting students with mental health issues. You may wish to find out if there is one or even lobby to get one.

The student association or student union may be a good place to make initial enquiries.

Q **What's the best time to disclose?**

A *There are several options:*

1. *At initial enquiry or on course application, in order to obtain assistance at selection interviews or receive funding priority.*
2. *After selection at enrolment, to negotiate adjustments and get funding priority.*
3. *At the start of the course, to get assistance in initial stages and plan for adjustments.*
4. *After the first week or two, after you have identified some difficulties or needs. You may, however, not have easy funding access if late.*
5. *During or after a period of unwellness, when you particularly need assistance.*
6. *At the time of excursion or field placement activities (if you are asked to declare any risks to safety).*

In relation to your funding for a specialist support worker or specialist tutor, the earlier you apply in the year for support the better, because funding timelines are generally early in the year. If you think you will need a higher level of support, then disclose early. If you think you will need a little or some support that doesn't involve funding, then later disclosure may be OK.

Controlling confidentiality: Do I need to tell everyone?

There are several ways of disclosing your mental health issue. This could range from anonymity, through limited disclosure, to full disclosure.

1. *Anonymously:* Ask for (through the students' association) or create a form on which a mental health issue may be declared without your name. This tells your college that there are students with mental health issues on campus, who still could use some services such as a retreat centre, a specialist newsletter or brochures.
2. *Partial disclosure:* You could tell the disability liaison officer or counsellor that you have/or have had a mental health issue but don't wish to register formally at this stage for greater assistance. You can be deliberately vague and say it is an illness or impairment. A better option might be to disclose the nature of your mental health issue to the disability liaison officer/counsellor but

place limits on disclosing the specific nature to all others, e.g. by allowing a statement 'this student is registered with the disability unit' or 'this student has a medical condition or a mental health impairment'.

An exception to confidentiality arises where a duty of care outweighs the right to confidentiality. Whether duty of care outweighs confidentiality depends on the circumstances of the case. A situation where there is a serious risk to the person themselves or another may justify a breach of confidentiality.

3 *Full disclosure*: You may decide that it's in your interest to declare the nature of your mental health issue to relevant staff only, e.g. to your teachers, tutors and course co-ordinators, and possibly some administrative, support and management staff, if you have significant contact with them. Describing the specific nature—e.g. bi -polar disorder—may be helpful in staff understanding you better and accommodating your needs more appropriately. You still have a right to ask informed staff for confidentiality, i.e. not to identify you to others, or describe you as having a bi-polar disorder.

4 *Conditional disclosure*: This type of disclosure varies depending on the conditions which you can set and agree with your worker. It could mean minimal disclosure to other staff initially, but could disclose if you were unwell, required specialised accommodations that need to be closely monitored or varied, or had difficulties in communicating or interacting with others.

You can decide on how much and how to disclose some impairment / disability to teaching staff in order to get accommodations in the course, or services that you need. You may prefer it if the disability liaison officer or counsellor communicates with your teachers or tutors.

Telling fellow students about your mental health impairments

It's up to you whether you disclose to other students or not. Generally, most students with mental health issues only tell friends they can trust. People from support or self-help groups are generally more understanding. When other students in your course can see some unusual things, like infrequent attendance, drinking water in class, or extreme distress, it might be an idea to explain it somehow, perhaps with a general illness or stress label. If you're not comfortable saying more yourself, you could ask your teacher or counsellor to do it.

Some benefits of disclosing to peers

If other students notice you have some course adjustments like later dates for assignments, double exam time or the like, they may wonder at or even envy your 'privileges'. One suggestion is not to

make known these adjustments, that is ask the teacher to be discreet about them, or again explain with a general illness.

If a major crisis occurred in which you had done or said things you were later embarrassed about, you might ask a trusted staff member to explain it to the class before you come back, and to make your return easier. The explanation need not give the nature of the mental health issue, but could include mention of your incomplete control (due to illness) and your stress, regret and/or discomfort.

Q **How do I convey some insight into my condition?**

A *Some people might say:*

I have a bi-polar disorder, which was triggered by stress.

I am a person suffering from a mental illness.

I had stress-related issues which still have an impact on my well-being.

I have had a mental illness. I am almost over it now, but I am still prone to relapse under stressful conditions.

Assessment and documentation

Stress is often a major contributing factor in developing a mental health condition. Many students at TAFE or university experience mental anguish for the first time and may be confused or distressed without knowing why. If you don't feel quite right, or feel that you are very stressed or even suicidal, it is recommended that you get a professional assessment.

You could see a doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist in the community or even perhaps on campus. Not all psychologists can give a full diagnosis, but they could do a diagnostic impression which may be sufficient for the purpose of the disability/special needs service, depending on their eligibility rules. Beware though, that if a person is diagnosed by a public mental health body, the label may 'stick' for a long time. Private practitioners may be more discreet.

Some signs of mental health issues include:

- difficulty concentrating or remembering
- feeling depressed, anxious, irritable or flat
- difficulty carrying out your goals
- panic attacks or phobias
- hearing voices or illusions
- anorexia
- difficulty thinking straight
- feeling suicidal

Assessment of learning and other needs

Some disability services may require a treating professional's statement about your mental health condition and often about your impairments and needs in relation to study. Discuss this with your treatment specialist beforehand, as well as with other trusted workers, friends or family to get a good assessment of your own situation. The disability liaison officer (or counsellor) may want to ask you in detail about your previous study experiences, your levels of functioning, the extent of support in your environment, the typical course of your condition, any side effects of your medication if taken and how these may influence your learning. They may also want to know about your hopes and fears, concerns and interests, other needs, strengths and weaknesses. The idea is to assess your needs in order to plan appropriate adjustments and levels of support.

This assessment may be an ongoing process, particularly if your condition or situation varies. Keep in regular contact with your worker, and let them know if the adjustments are 'working' or not (to allow further changes).

Q **How do I know what my needs are?**

A *If you have studied recently, you probably already know what you need in order to learn effectively or to cope with being at college. However, much depends on what course you are studying, its pace, level, the way it is taught and the people in the course. If you are returning to study after a longer break, there will be much to learn, not only the course content itself, but also how to learn and how to build on your strengths and compensate for any difficulties which may be due to your mental health issues. It is really important to be aware of how you learn best, what works and what doesn't work for you.*

Your needs may be multiple and change over time. This can relate to the changing course requirements as well as to your state of mental health. Needs are often difficult to recognise and put into words and it can sometimes be a struggle to see oneself clearly. It's important to remember that mental disorder or impairment doesn't always translate into major problems with learning. Sometimes, all you may need is extra time to complete assessment tasks.

Even if you don't know what you need, tell disability support staff or a counsellor if you feel that study or being at college is hard or stressful, or if you are worried about passing or thinking of dropping out. It's much better to deal with problems early rather than waiting until they become overwhelming. You may be able to get some adjustments to your course or services that could make the difference in your studies.

What if staff talk with others about me without my permission ?

You have a right to confidentiality. Staff should not discuss your condition without your permission. If you feel this right has been breached, clarify exactly what the staff member said and approach them individually to ask why. If you are not happy with the explanation or they don't express regret, you may get advice from your student association or student union, or help with drafting a letter raising the issue. The best outcome would be if staff became aware of the importance of your privacy and the consequences of breaking it for you and for them, and never did it again! You could also expect an apology and some repair to your reputation, e.g. an acknowledgement of your strengths.

Do I have to disclose for every assignment?

Conditions of disclosure may vary. Ideally you would only have to disclose once every two to three years (and re-register every year). Some conditions are long term and should be recognised as such. Ask your disability liaison officer to streamline the process. Your treating professional could, for example, state that your mental health condition will most likely affect you for the next two to threeyears.

Q **What if I still have detrimental effects on study after recovery?**

A *In some people, the effects of the mental health impairment continue for some years even if the condition is no longer present, and the Disability Discrimination Act (see below) allows for this. You may, however, need a statement explaining how it still has an impact on your studies or functioning.*

Know your rights

You have a right to expect some additional assistance in meeting your needs. This is based on the federal Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1992 which defines disability as 'any disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or that results in disturbed behavior', or that results in the person learning differently, or where there is a partial or full loss of mental functions.

This can include presently existing disorders, previous disorders (which still have an impact), a potential future disorder, or a disorder which others believe that a person has.

Other legislation which may be relevant includes State laws on equal opportunity or anti-discrimination, most of which use the term impairment instead of disability. The DDA says that if you are not treated as favourably

as people without the disability, or you are required to comply with a condition which is unreasonable and which you are not able to or don't comply with, then you may be discriminated against.

This means that you have a right to have your disability accommodated, by facilities or services being adjusted to assist you. The only way the educational institution can excuse itself from this responsibility is if it can argue unjustifiable hardship.

Q **What if I do not receive the support I believe I'm entitled to?**

A *If you are seriously dissatisfied, you could advocate for yourself, involve an external advocate, lodge grievances with the management to address the issue and/or seek some legal advice. Find out what the grievance procedure is at your college and present your concerns through the appropriate channels. Request some emotional support as well if needed (perhaps the counselling service, consumer advocate or a teacher from your previous school may be of help here).*

Section 2

Student self-management

Student self-management

AS A STUDENT with mental health issues, you may experience a variety of symptoms, abilities and reactions. Some people with mental health issues struggle with seeing themselves and other events in perspective. This can make it harder to choose goals, define problems, make decisions and plans, or to check one's own progress. Nevertheless, many students with mental health issues manage their lives and get satisfaction while reaching their goals.

This section will describe the ways in which you can prepare yourself to get the most out of studying. It will suggest strategies for managing your own motivation for study, stress and emotions on campus. It will also make suggestions for interacting with other people, advocating for your rights, and influencing your home environment.

Some of these suggestions may be easier than others. If you find some challenging, you may wish to talk about them to your counsellor, trusted friend or family member, or other professionals.

Establishing clear goals

First, it helps to know why you are going to study. Having a clear idea of the objectives you want to achieve is an enormous boost to motivation.

Different people have different reasons, but some possible goals are described below. Tick if any apply to you (and add your own).

- ❑ to improve my chances of getting a satisfying job in the future
- ❑ to develop confidence in my abilities or skills
- ❑ to learn more about something
- ❑ to get the necessary qualifications for a particular job
- ❑ to do something structured
- ❑ to mix with people
- ❑ to contribute my best to my chosen career field
- ❑ to prove to others my capabilities
- ❑ to develop my whole self
- ❑ to test my current perseverance (staying power)
- ❑ to be with friends who are studying
- ❑ other:

It is possible to have several reasons for studying, not just one. Write these reasons down on a card, and carry it with you or display it on your desk. Visualise other ways of achieving those goals, dealing successfully with setbacks, and the rewards that can follow. Picture yourself as a very determined, resourceful person who can adjust to change and learn from experience. The goals themselves can be adjusted when they have been achieved or are no longer as helpful as other ones.

Career options

An obvious goal for many is a future career. If you are choosing which career to follow, do a lot of planning and self-searching. Some useful starting questions are:

- What are your interests?
- Do you like to investigate, to create, to organise, to help people, to influence people, or to do something practical or technical?
- What are your values?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What is your personality and how will it 'fit' into a career field?
- What are the prerequisites for the career or course?
- What are the prospects for the job or career?

You can do your own thinking or research, but you can also see a vocational (career) counsellor. Most TAFEs, other VET providers and universities provide vocational counselling for current and prospective (future) students. Many students find it useful to talk to others working in the field they are interested in. Job guides, career information centres, libraries and professional associations have useful career information.

As one student with mental health issues said, 'Do what you really like, otherwise it's a waste'. Also it's a good idea to have a 'plan B', as an alternative, so that you have other options as well.

Your priorities may change over time and you might decide that the course you are presently doing is not what you wanted. Nothing is set in concrete, so allow yourself the right to change your mind. However, you need to be aware of 'cut-off dates' for course changes.

Remind yourself of your goals often when you need to, especially when serious study and written work is due. There are many distractions in life, such as watching TV, socialising, or playing sport, which need to be balanced with study. Remember your previous successes too, the ways in which you applied yourself, your strengths and positive qualities.

Find people who share similar goals, or support you fully in yours, and create a supportive environment by seeking out and connecting

with people who are encouraging, positive and trustworthy. Even one person can make a major difference. Successful self-management includes building in supports. Forming or joining a study/work support group or network outside the TAFE/uni with organisations that provide support services for people who have mental health needs may also be worthwhile.

Self-management and development

Self-management

Most students want, as far as possible, to manage their own lives, to retain self-determination, self-respect and self-esteem. Students with mental health issues want to continue their development as a person while recovering from their mental health issues.

As a student, you may want to set goals, plan how to meet them, put the plan into action, monitor how well you are meeting the goals, and adjust either the plan or the goals to achieve progress. You also need to consider your mental health impairments and how they might influence or interfere with the 'plan-act-monitor-adjust' process.

It might be useful to keep a diary and write down important things, including: what you are doing well and what not so well, and what things you have tried and which worked. This will help you monitor your progress.

Alternatively, talking this process through with a counsellor or a friend may be helpful. If they ever try to make decisions for you, tell them you would prefer if they empathically showed you what steps or information you are missing, so you can work it out yourself and learn from the experience as much as possible.

Self-management requires you to have some insight into how you are, to accept and respect yourself, and to be patient with discovering and trying out ways that work for you to achieve your goals. If you are mentally well and balanced, you will be better able to perform and complete your study easier.

Self-development

Self-development is very close to self-management, but there is more focus on developing your full potential, your unique self, your talents; it focusses on your ability to feel integrated and creative. Self-development also involves recovering and learning from setbacks, and on finding meanings in the process of living. Studying can be a stepping stone in your self-development. You deserve recognition

and acknowledgement of your study, and affirmation for your efforts. This and your own satisfaction will increase your self-esteem. What is more, it is not just the results of your course, but also the quality of interacting with other people on campus, and the meanings that you discover throughout the course, that may enrich your life and allow you to grow as a person.

Benefits and costs of study

When committing yourself to study, you need to be aware of both the advantages and the disadvantages of studying. That way you can prepare yourself better and see the long-term outcomes of hard work. Many students find it useful to study part-time or with get-well breaks, but this means any course can take twice as long. For a long-term project like study, you need to be certain of its benefits.

The following table gives an idea of the costs and benefits of study.

Some possible benefits of study	Some possible costs of study
Satisfaction and greater self-esteem if one gets good results	Disappointment and challenge to self-esteem if one withdraws or gets poor results
Better chance of finding a more skilled job with good income	Hard to find well-paying jobs
Structured day activities	Effort to participate
Learn to get used to morning activity	Hard to get up for morning lectures
Good return on investment if obtaining jobs later	Course fees, books etc., may be expensive
Gain a study/office space at home for future use	Investment into study space, e.g. desk, chair, bookshelf, filing cabinet
Gain confidence interacting with people	Interacting with people can cause stress
Gain a chance to contribute to wider society	Harder to find ways of contributing except through family or voluntary work
Gain a student rather than patient role	
Student discounts on lots of services and products	
Stimulation of the mind through learning and interacting on campus	

Dealing with setbacks

Some students find that keeping their mental balance is harder than studying the course. Sometimes, discovering the limits of your functioning may be painful. This is part of the learning and self-development process. You may wish to review your goals, or to rest

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and prepare better for another try. With hope and perseverance, people with mental health issues can achieve great goals and fulfil their potential to its optimum. Many people with mental health impairments are completing certificates, diplomas, degrees, masters and PhDs. Many famous people have contributed much to society, through the arts, politics, science or other ways, developing their potential and achieving recognition despite their mental health impairments.

Self-development is a life-long process. Take your time to reflect on your self-development, perhaps with a skilled therapist or a very good friend, and enjoy the road along the way.

Coping with stress on campus

As a student you may have a range of feelings on campus. Some of these may be good feelings, some not so good. It will be different from school, which you may not have enjoyed. However, it is a good idea to be realistic and prepare yourself to manage your emotions, so that you can get on with tertiary study and life successfully.

Here are some suggestions for building resilience to stress:

- ✔ Recognise what you feel.
- ✔ Soothe and calm yourself, with your own resources, or find some supportive people or environment.
- ✔ Pinpoint if possible what is triggering off your feelings.
- ✔ Work out how to prevent or minimise that trigger, and control your reaction. It is a good idea to do this with another person, like a counsellor or therapist.
- ✔ Practise a positive attitude every day, even if for five minutes in the morning. Then use it at the first sign of something potentially stressful.

Study is stressful! Some students with mental health issues may be surprised by unexpected things cropping up, some of which may be easy to deal with but others may be harder. This may be because they are new or because of some bad experiences with similar situations earlier in life. The first year of study is usually the most stressful, but after that many students find they adjust to the study environment and settle down to study steadily, perhaps with some coping strategies or special assistance. It may be helpful to remember that almost all students feel stressed by their course at some time.

Sometimes the campus itself is unpleasant, with parking or public transport difficulties, or the classrooms or cafeterias too big or too small to be comfortable. Even the sun shining in, or too hot or cold in the classrooms can be stressful. Safety on campus may be another issue that concerns you, and not having a quiet, interruption-free

place to study at home may be a problem. Other possible stressors include: the course may have topics that trigger off reactions in you, or move too fast, the teacher may be late or absent (leaving times with no apparent structure), your computer might crash at a critical moment (losing your assignment if you haven't backed it up), you may miss some classes and fear you are falling behind and can't catch up. You could become stressed if the teacher is not flexible with timelines, or may not understand your needs sufficiently, the assignment or essay may be extremely hard to write up to your satisfaction or the feedback or marks from teachers may seem unfair or disappointing.

The stressful nature of relating to others on campus

A number of students find relating to others one of the most stressful aspects of studying. You may feel lonely when nobody approaches you. You may feel judged by people, you may be affected too much by their feelings, or you may take things personally which were not meant that way. It may be hard to trust people, or they may let you down sometimes. Supporting staff may not always be available. You may feel pressured by other people (e.g. your family or your teacher) or feel frustrated or even angry when people aren't as responsive or understanding as you expect them to be. You may feel distressed if someone is picking on you. You may feel embarrassed or ashamed when you do something that is not quite right in the situation, or if others belittle you.

How to cope with negative feelings

Not everyone will feel these, but it is good to be able to recognise them if they do come up.

Fear

Fear is an uncomfortable sensation when you are expecting something specific to harm you. It is called anxiety when you can't pinpoint what you are afraid of. Fear can become panic at the extreme. Some people fear a negative reaction from others even if the others are not really thinking negatively about them.

Some ways of coping with fear include:

- Find someone on campus you can trust who is calm and you can feel supported by.
- Practise relaxation, meditation or breathing (e.g. play a relaxation tape).
- Keep with you some visual reminder of peaceful thoughts or beautiful places.
- Reassure yourself by positive self-talk, practise every day.

- Identify what is triggering the fear and prepare some actions to prevent, minimise or double check the threat.
- Do some physical exercise (e.g. walking or swimming) daily.

Distress

When you are feeling emotional suffering, sadness or anguish, you are most likely distressed. Distress includes feelings of depression, hopelessness or being trapped. Some people feel distressed when disappointed, pressured or frustrated. In the extreme, it is called trauma.

Some ways of coping with distress include:

- Find someone who will listen and understand in depth what you are going through.
- Allow expression of your feelings in a safe, confidential environment.
- Take part in self-nurturing, healing or creative activities (e.g. taking an aromatherapy bath, singing, bushwalking).
- Practise relaxation.
- For ongoing or repeating distress, get a good professional to help you through.
- Practise positive self-talk every day.

Anger

The milder end of anger is called irritation. At the more intense end, it is called hostility or rage. When a person acts on their anger, it may become aggressiveness. Aggression may provoke the other person, so it is not really recommended. Even throwing objects may be dangerous. Verbal abuse is not acceptable on campus either. Neither is swearing in most situations.

Coping with anger:

- Stop any action or words of retaliation.
- Remember it is OK to say you are feeling really angry and why.
- Walk away from the situation that triggered it to calm down for a few hours if possible.
- Talk with someone about what caused the anger and how to act to address the problem, and how to prevent it in the future. Ask for mediation to resolve the conflict.
- Do some physical exercise, e.g. going for a run, playing squash.
- Practise relaxation and calming self-talk every day.

Humiliation

Humiliation is a painful feeling of being devalued, judged, exposed, or rejected. It may include feelings of embarrassment or shame. Some

people feel bad or a nuisance when others don't tolerate them. Stigma, or unfair discriminative treatment is extremely humiliating. This is why confidentiality is so important.

Some ways of coping with humiliation:

- Talk it over with a counsellor or support worker.
- Remind yourself of your positive qualities.
- Remember that not everyone will like you.
- Work out what caused the feeling and whether and how the cause can be addressed.
- Ask someone to advocate for you if it is hard to confront the others yourself.
- Practise relaxation and positive self talk every day.

Self-soothing in times of stress

Here are some suggested strategies to avoid stress:

- Find out ways that calm you down best, and practise often.
- Ask for a quiet retreat or safe space.
- Take time off when feeling especially vulnerable.
- Know when to turn to others for support.
- Try to rearrange your situation to minimise stress.

Treatment on and off campus

Mental health issues are not easy to recover from, and you will need to find the best professionals and methods to regain your mental health. As a consumer you have a right to choose what kind of treatment you want, to communicate its effectiveness, and to expect adjustments if needed. The only exception is if there is a risk to safety to yourself or others.

Primary treatment

For more severe mental health disorders, such as severe depression, schizophrenia, anorexia, bi-polar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and panic disorder, it is recommended that primary treatment is obtained from a clinical psychologist and/or psychiatrist. For other mental health issues, clinical and counselling psychologists, some psychotherapists, clinical social workers or other psychologists with training and/or experience with the particular mental health issue may be appropriate. For drug and alcohol issues, look for trained drug and alcohol counsellors. These professionals are not usually employed by VET providers or universities.

However, psychological or psychotherapeutic treatment is essential for full psychological recovery, so look for a professional that

understands you and treats you well, is affordable and that you can see over a long period of time if needed.

Secondary (adjunct) treatment

This is additional treatment by another professional who can help you with specific areas, such as stress, anxiety or anger management. As a student, many issues and feelings might come up for you through study and campus activities, and you may need therapeutic support to deal with them so that you can maintain your studies successfully. It could also be called 'educational support counselling', supportive therapy, stress management, empathic companionship, or other terms of your choice.

Most likely you will have primary treatment from professionals in the general community. Most counsellors may be able to provide adjunct treatment, or educational support therapy. You may need to clarify their long-term availability, and negotiate long-term access as an accommodation through the disability assistance channels (usually through the disability officer). After all, it is the counsellors' job to help students succeed by psychologically supporting them, and the disability or special needs co-ordinator's goal is to help students succeed through arranging additional assistance by adjustments to the educational system.

If the counselling service has a strict policy on time limits, find out how to re-enter the service with a different issue, or before a possible crisis or relapse.

Medication and side effects

You may have been prescribed some medications on a short-term or long-term basis, including anti-depressant, anti-anxiety and anti-psychotic (to control hallucinations and delusions) medication. The amount of medication needs to be adjusted to suit you and your situation. Tell the prescribing doctor or psychiatrist that you are studying and for what period. Try to schedule any changes to medication during term breaks or at least to weekends, so as not to disrupt your studies too much. If your medication has very sedative effects, try taking it in the evening or just before a weekend. Keep note of the side effects and tell your doctor so that they can be minimised. You should be able to receive accommodations for any remaining side effects.

If your course involves operating machinery or driving to college or on work placement, you need to discuss with your treating doctor how the medication is affecting you and whether it is safe to operate machinery or drive. If unsafe, you need to tell your support worker on campus so that alternative arrangements can be made. You still may be able to learn

operational skills through simulated exercises, virtual reality technology, or extra safety measures. Alcohol may worsen your condition or increase the sedative effects of the medication. Possession of alcohol or being affected by alcohol or drugs is not generally acceptable on campus and may result in disciplinary measures.

Some common adverse side effects of anti-psychotic medications

(Adapted from SANE anti-psychotic medication brochure)

	Dry mouth	Blurred vision	Drowsiness	Dizziness	Too much saliva	Sun sensitivity	Fast heart rate	Movement and posture
Risperdal & Zyprexa			•	•				
Clozaril *			•		•		•	
Largactil	•	•	•			•		•
Modecate	•	•						•
Anatensol	•	•						•
Stelazine	•	•						•
Calmazine	•	•					•	•
Neulactil	•	•	•				•	•
Mellaril	•	•	•				•	•
Aldazine	•	•	•					•
Serenace								•
Haldol								•
Decanoate								•
Navone	•	•						
Anti-parkinsonian agents	•	•						

* Clozaril has a serious side effect on 1% of people

Accommodations for side effects of medication

Many students have found the following strategies to be useful:

- bringing drinks to class
- taping lectures
- note-taker

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- allowing walking (or time off) during lectures to relieve restlessness
- holding a hand or a handkerchief around the mouth or face

Tardive dyskinesia, or involuntary movements of mouth, tongue or other parts of the body, and parkinsonian-type reactions may be embarrassing in public and discourage some from starting a course. Some ways of minimising the embarrassment may include explaining to others that it is an unfortunate side effect of medication for an illness, adding that it doesn't affect abilities. Choosing a small campus, flexible delivery (self-paced) or studying off campus may be a useful short-term (or even long-term) option.

Relating to people on campus

The first year at a campus can be lonely for some students, including those with mental health issues. It takes time to orient oneself, to get to know other students, to find out which staff are available and understanding. It can be hard for any student to reach out and introduce oneself to others, let alone for students with mental health issues who may feel unsure of themselves or fearful of contact in case it is hurtful.

VET and university campuses reflect broader society and, unfortunately, attitudes of the general public to mental health issues can still be negative at times, although some students or staff on campus may be very understanding. Some people are neither positive nor negative; they may not necessarily have any strong pre-formed ideas, and will respond in most situations.

Relating to staff

Introducing yourself to a teacher or lecturer after a class or by appointment is a good idea. At least the staff will be able to see you as a real person, not just a name on an essay and, if needed, you can approach them again more easily. Academic staff generally can see students for 15 to 30 minutes, either occasionally or regularly, by arrangement. Staff may well have other appointments or other classes at the end of your class, so rather than relying on catching them at the end of class, ring to make an appointment. Part-time staff may be difficult to contact as they will have other commitments off campus.

Support services staff may be more flexible in hours of availability, but you will generally need to make an appointment. Counsellors usually have 50-minute appointments, while disability support staff will spend more time initially and then less as needed. If you and your support worker don't 'get along', try to find someone else. Remember, though, that it takes some time to get to know each other, and that too much changing may not be seen in a positive light.

Acknowledging how you might affect others

Other people are responsible for their own emotions. You will appreciate that like all people, you will have some effect on others, through your behaviours, ideas, absence, accommodations, and relationships. Some students with mental health impairments feel uncomfortable or even guilty if others felt distressed or frightened during some interactions with them. It is important to understand that at the time, you were affected by your mental health issues and could not act differently, and therefore cannot blame yourself.

It may be worth considering to acknowledge others' feelings or reactions to you, or express a concern for them, in a safe environment, perhaps with a teacher or counsellor present at a suitable time. In some cases, you could even arrange for someone to speak on your behalf, in your absence. It might make it easier to return to the class or the group without tension.

If you feel that others are treating you unfairly, discuss it with a disability liaison officer or counsellor. They may be able to come up with some options on how to address the issues.

Self-advocacy

Self-advocacy is being able to argue your own case, or to speak in favour of your needs, to another person. Of course, you can choose to have someone else to speak on your behalf, but you may wish to do as much as you can by using your own resources. You may start with using other advocates and gradually change over to self-advocacy; or, you may try to advocate on your own behalf, but with some help e.g. a letter about your needs, rights or an offer to provide more information by another worker. Your student association or student union may be of assistance in helping you with advocacy or with advocacy training and the counselling service may also be able to assist you with advice and possible training options.

Q **When could you do with some advocacy?**

A

- ✔ *When you enrol and need accommodations while you study from academic staff.*
- ✔ *When you need extra assistance from support staff (over and above 'usual' level of service).*
- ✔ *When a problem occurs and it is not being resolved.*
- ✔ *When you see a potential problem and you want to prevent it with others' assistance.*
- ✔ *When you would like more opportunities than are currently on offer.*

The pre-requisite skills for self-advocacy include:

- confidence in your rights
- fair insight into your needs and situation and others' points of view
- good communication and empathic skills
- assertiveness and negotiation skills
- ability to keep cool
- ability to know when to retreat and gather more resources

Self-advocacy in six steps

The following self-advocacy steps were adapted from the *Handbook for communication and problem-solving skills training: A cognitive behavioural approach.*

1. Introduce yourself and state that you have an impairment, or are registered with the Disability or Counselling Office, or have an outside professional to back up your condition (without necessarily saying what type of condition).
2. Mention your rights. 'As you know there are Equal Opportunity and Disability Discrimination Acts which try to level the playing field with other students by providing accommodations for my needs . . .'
3. (Optional, but may be a good strategy.) Express some understanding of their possible viewpoint (e.g. 'It could be that this may take some extra time and be a little inconvenient, but . . .').
4. Request what you want from them by continuing with: 'If you' (e.g. If you can provide double time for all the coursework . . .).
5. Finish by stating the benefits for you by saying 'then I . . .' (e.g. '. . . then I would be able to finish the course successfully at my own pace').
6. Be friendly and polite. You can still make your point without getting the person off-side. Develop a friendly relationship with your teachers.

(Bedell, J & Lennox, S 1997, *Handbook for communication and problem-solving skills training: A cognitive behavioural approach*, John Wiley & Sons,-NY.)

Possible complications in the advocacy process

1. The staff member may not know about the Acts, and may need some education about this. Let them consult their colleagues or the manager of the Disability Office, or bring a one-page summary along.
2. Staff may find they are obliged to provide accommodations only to the extent of unjustifiable hardship. If they use this knowledge to refuse your request, find out exactly for what reasons, and prepare a counter-argument, perhaps with outside help.

3 Staff may try to vary the accommodation or make it conditional, e.g. by saying 'I understand your request but I have to consult with other teachers to see whether you need that much time'. You can respond by saying 'When you . . ., I think . . .'. For example, you could say 'When you say you want to include other teachers in deciding how much time I need, I think that's unfair because I know what I need best, and I feel very disappointed'. If they are still unwilling to grant you the requested accommodations, then you may have to offer an alternative, e.g. obtain a statement from a professional to back up your needs. Or you can compromise (e.g. complete the course in one and a half time but with extra tutorial assistance). You will find you will achieve more if you are flexible.

Show your appreciation if they are co-operative. You don't really have to, because they really should be accommodating your needs up to the level of unjustifiable hardship anyway. However, it would show goodwill on your part, and prepare the ground for another round of requests, if the accommodations weren't working well and had to be adjusted.

Home environment and basic study needs

Most students find they need a comfortable and quiet environment to study in.

The following may be useful (check newspapers or your college notice-board for cheaper second-hand alternatives to the more expensive items):

- a large desk near a window
- an ergonomic office chair
- a lamp
- a bookshelf
- a filing cabinet
- not too many distractions, especially in the area facing the desk
- a computer and printer is an advantage

Quiet (some need this more than others)

- ask others to turn down TV or use cordless headphones for listening
- study during naturally quiet time
- study in libraries
- ask not to be interrupted during study (perhaps leave a sign on the door)
- leave phone on the answering machine
- use ear plugs if necessary

Balance is essential in any study day.

- walk half an hour at least once a day
- do other enjoyable activities (theatre, sport, TV)
- take a brief stretch every half-hour of studying

Relaxation is important

- listen to relaxing music for an hour a day
- read at night before turning out the light to sleep
- burn some aromatic oils in your study
- do meditation or progressive muscle relaxation

The brain needs glucose, so an adequate and balanced food intake is essential.

Money

Money issues can contribute significantly to stress, so it's important to be aware of the financial implications of study before starting.

- Work out a budget.
- Allow extra money for books, photocopying, travel, fees.
- A loan may be necessary; ask your campus for details.
- Don't forget to fill in Austudy forms on time.
- Austudy requires a psychiatrist's statement if you want to study less than 75 per cent of a course load.
- If you are already on a disability or other pension, you can get an Austudy supplement of $30 a week for at least 25 per cent workload of a course.
- You may be able to get advance payment on your social security benefits to buy a computer or other big items.

Some information for families and friends

(You might like to copy this list and show it to family and/or friends.)

Here are some suggestions—try them out and readjust as necessary.

- Let your relative or friend with mental health impairments decide for themselves whether and what to study.
- Be encouraging and supportive.
- Ask him/her whether and how you can help.
- Share the cooking, cleaning, etc. fairly.
- Recognise that studying is very demanding and requires great concentration and perseverance.
- Respect their need for quiet and no interruptions during study.
- Don't make critical comments even if asked, e.g. to review a draft. Gently refuse and refer to appropriate person, e.g. a learning skills advisor or tutor. If you choose to provide feedback, include strong positive points as well as suggestions for improvement.
- Remember that editing text for a friend or relative nearly always leads to conflict! Refer to a good English usage guide such as Murray Smith's *Right words*.

- Show an interest in the field of study, listen to the person's ideas, projects.
- If you are concerned for their well-being, share your concern and together work out some guideposts or signs of stress or unwellness and some ways of dealing with it, such as suggesting that the student
  - ✔ takes a day off or longer (arrange lecture taping)
  - ✔ naps during free day or sleeps longer
  - ✔ reduces other tasks
  - ✔ contacts a treatment professional or campus counsellor
  - ✔ increases relaxation experiences
  - ✔ reads/rehearses positive self-talk
  - ✔ starts or increases medication
- Be available for debriefing about the day's events of concern.
- Recognise the person may not always be able to respond fully to your needs.
- Accept the person's dreams and ambitions (unless they are totally out of touch with reality), as they probably are the motives to study seriously and achieve progress.
- Remind the person of previous successes (even in other areas) if their confidence falters.
- Don't judge their suitability for the career or be threatened by their goals or successes.
- Celebrate the person's academic successes and show some admiration of their achievements.

Section 3

Educational journey

Readiness to study

So you have decided to undertake tertiary study. Are you feeling confident and prepared, or do you have lingering doubts or bad memories from secondary school?

Here are some suggestions for building your self-image as a student:

- ✔ Remember things you have done in the past (e.g. fixed things, baby-sat, organised, worked, read, solved, played, developed a hobby). All these things which you have learnt along the way point to many skills and abilities, even if you weren't aware of them.
- ✔ Join a support group for new and ongoing students, either general or related to mental health. 'Virtual' or on-line discussion lists are a valuable alternative.
- ✔ Ask friends who are studying to show you their course materials and assessment tasks.
- ✔ Pair up with a friend who is in a similar situation and compare your experiences and support each other during applications and study. You don't have to be in the same course.
- ✔ Enrol in a Preparing for Tertiary Study course before you start, perhaps at your college or uni. Enquire whether they have a bridging scheme. Other places to try are adult education centres or neighborhood learning centres.
- ✔ Enrol in a short course that is an easy starting point to apply your skills and test yourself out.
- ✔ Learn and practise basic computer and word-processing skills. Try typing—tutor software or a train-a-voice-type package.
- ✔ Find out what language and learning skills assistance is available at your college and regularly make appointments with advisors to go over your drafts or develop new skills.
- ✔ Join or start up a study group of two to four students from your course, to meet once or twice a week and study together.
- ✔ Find a 'study buddy' and remind each other of timelines, share borrowed resources, clarify difficult points, and catch up on missed lectures.
- ✔ Read books and brochures on how to study, and practise new skills on magazine articles or interesting topics. Some people learn better from videos or audiotapes. Ask learning advisors which are the best resources to buy.
- ✔ Learn all about how to use library resources including extra assistance or resources for students with impairments.

- ✔ Discover your own learning style— a number of learning style inventories are on the internet.

Finding and applying for the right courses

The most important thing is to know your interests in order to find the right field to study. Remember, you don't need to disclose your mental health issues at the selection interview.

Advice other students have found useful includes:

- ✔ Explore your interests, dreams and career wishes.
- ✔ Consider a vocational assessment with an interest inventory, available from your TAFE counsellor.
- ✔ Match your interests with career options.
- ✔ Research career options in depth from specialist career information centres.
- ✔ Choose institutions to apply for, considering their location, costs, reputation, and range of support services.
- ✔ Find out course pre-requisites and selection criteria from handbooks, course brochures, course advisor, disability liaison worker or counsellor. Many of these will be in your library or you can access them via the internet.
- ✔ Prepare your applications and interview with possible assistance from a counsellor or disability support staff. Practise interviews with a friend.
- ✔ Find out more about the course, mode of delivery, timetables, the expected range of students, learning environment and assessment flexibility from the department, ex-students, or student services. Does the course suit your needs and learning style? Some universities and VET providers may have continuous assessment with open time-frames, and off-campus options or flexible delivery that is self-paced will sometimes be possible.
- ✔ Carefully consider what workload would suit you best, and how to indicate your preferences for part-time or reduced workload if preferred.
- ✔ Evaluate your study readiness and the level of qualification that's within your reach (e.g. certificate, diploma, degree).
- ✔ Apply for several courses and institutions, to maximise your chances of selection.
- ✔ Discuss these options and decisions with a friend or counsellor.
- ✔ Start this planning process early, so that you're ready to apply in September when many courses have closing dates.
- ✔ To save yourself unnecessary effort, check out whether you can claim any credit for your previous relevant educational, life or work experience for equivalent modules, through the recognition of prior learning provision.
- ✔ Remember to allow plenty of time for travel and finding the right rooms for interview, enrolment or orientation.

Using student services on campus

There are a number of services on campus to assist with your learning; it's worth knowing what they are and how they can assist, even if you are not sure if you will use them. These services will help you obtain any accommodations you may be eligible for, from parking to special exam arrangements, up to the point of unjustifiable hardship to the educational institution. If you don't want to disclose your impairment to the appropriate office, you may still try special consideration procedure or getting a sick certificate from your doctor (although these may be more limited in the time or range of concessions available).

Disability support staff

Disability support staff (disability liaison officer or special needs co-ordinators) assess the student's needs, and plan and co-ordinate accommodations and assistance to address any areas which are affected by an impairment. You will need to disclose your impairment to the disability support staff to get the accommodations. You could, however, just meet them initially and ask what accommodations and services would be available for students with mental health issues, without 'registering' formally on a form. You could also, perhaps, choose to be put on a mailing list for updated information. Disability support staff also educate other staff about your rights.

In some States, there is a specialist service called teacher/consultant in psychiatric disability. Ask if there is such a position at your VET provider, TAFE or university.

Counsellor

Counsellors may provide vocational (career) counselling, educational counselling and study skills support, and personal counselling. This may include assessment of your needs, primary or secondary treatment or supportive therapy, skills training, assisting with change or stress, suggesting useful resources, or linking you with other services. They can provide co-ordination of services to meet your needs. Counsellors generally assist with special consideration or special arrangements.

Financial counsellor/advisor

Financial advisors can advise and assist you with Austudy, fees, fee concessions or exemptions, costs, loans, budgeting, financial difficulties, advance payments from theDepartment of Social Security, or other matters. They can help you prepare statements, appeals or

advocate on your behalf. Ask for a referral from the counsellor or disability officer if you need extra assistance or accommodations in this area.

Learning skills advisor or educational counsellor

Learning skills advisors can help with language, thinking, writing, time management, oral presentations, exams and general study skills. They may assess your current level and design a program to learn new skills or suggest some pointers for improvement. Ask if they have any cognitive rehabilitation exercises or useful software tools to make study easier.

Information officer

Information officers have the latest information on courses, including brochures and handbooks, application forms, closing dates, academic staff to contact, student services and facilities. It's a good idea to tell them exactly what things you need to know so they can refer you to the right staff member for more assistance.

Housing officer

Housing officers help you find suitable accommodation; they advise you on rental rights and can advocate on your behalf. They also have an emergency housing list. Ask if they are prepared to check out the suitability of the accommodation with you, or arrange extra assistance.

Referral to supported housing accommodation for people who have a mental health condition may be requested. This includes very low rent and possible extra support depending on need.

Course co-ordinator

Your course co-ordinator can work out ways to accommodate your needs, by adjusting the course delivery or rules. Some are very understanding and flexible, but some may be extremely busy or feel constrained (ring to make an appointment if necessary).

Student association

The student association or student union may also have support workers, self-help groups, social activities and clubs, as well as opportunities to influence student and educational life through proactive strategies. They may also be able to promote your rights or assist with grievances. If you feel they are not comfortable with

mental health issues, ask them to develop a proposal to build some support structures, such as a resource library, a drop-in area, a project worker, or an educational campaign. The student association may be a good place to empower yourself and build a network of like-minded people.

Q **Is this all too confusing?**

A *Choose one support worker*

Some students prefer to have one support worker to turn to, to focus on their needs and co-ordinate other services and accommodations. You may choose a staff member, such as the counsellor or the disability liaison officer and ask them to play that role.

Enrolment, orientation and transition to campus life

Once you are offered a place, a whole new journey starts in earnest. The first six months or so are most challenging, because of all the changes one needs to make or negotiate.

At enrolment time

- Find out exactly when, where and how to enrol. Usually you will need to pay fees, and bring any evidence of status concessions. Allow half a day to one day.
- You may ask the disability support worker to accompany you, or arrange a separate enrolment time.
- There may be long queues and delays, so bring a drink and a good book, or consider asking for priority queuing.
- Ask questions about what is being arranged and what is the next step.
- You may need to choose subjects, streams, or timetable options, so give yourself some time to think it over. If possible get a handbook beforehand and read up on the options.
- You may bring a friend or case worker to help clarify or explain the requirements.
- If you find the process too stressful, take time out and seek support.
- Start early so that you have full choice on subject and timetable options. As they get filled up they may not be available later in the day.

How do I get oriented to life on campus?

- Find out about orientation activities and attend as many as you can. This is important not only to learn about the campus, but

because it's a good opportunity to make new friends (most college friendships begin in these early weeks).

- Get a map of the buildings and walk around a number of times, noting special features and names of buildings.
- Attend any special introduction sessions, including the library and on student services.
- Experiment with favourite spots and make yourself comfortable. The campus belongs to everyone, including you.
- Bring a friend or ask the support worker to show you around.
- Use the student association lounge if you're not yet comfortable elsewhere.
- Introduce yourself to other students in your course and invite them for coffee or lunch together.
- Join student clubs or societies that interest you and attend meetings, maybe with a fellow student.
- Take part in gym, yoga or sporting activities.
- Follow safety precautions especially at night (e.g. walk with a safe person or the security officer), use well-lit pathways, know safety areas.
- Avoid very crowded or noisy places if you find them uncomfortable.
- Make the place your own, note what you like about it, create a sense of belonging even if you're on your own.

Transition to campus life?

Moving from secondary school or the community to post-secondary education involves significant changes for all students. You might find the following strategies useful:

- Remember it's normal to feel a little unsure in times of change.
- Develop three or four friends on campus if possible.
- Work out and adjust a weekly routine of study and attendance.
- Consider going to the counsellor for support to reflect on your transition experiences.
- Join a peer support or mentoring scheme.
- Talk with some teaching staff, either during breaks, after class or by appointment. A good reason is to clarify a point made in a lecture.
- Attend seminars and guest speakers about student life and your areas of interest (if you're not sure, try them out).
- Find out about relevant campus rules and procedures, and expectations of academic staff, (noting any of these may be adjusted if necessary). Consider going to the learning skills advisor, particularly with your first piece of work.

- Assess your changing needs and whether accommodations are meeting them. Let your support worker (e.g. disability liaison officer), know.
- Re-evaluate your choices and readjust if possible, (e.g. a better timetable).
- Celebrate success, by giving yourself rewards, going out with friends, or remembering that you've done well and saying positive things to yourself.

Learning skills and study strategies

Post-secondary education requires quite different learning techniques to those which were required at secondary school. VET and university is an adult learning environment in which you will be expected to be an independent learner. The new skills expected of you can be learnt. However, consider doing some additional courses or talk to the campus learning skills advisors about courses on reading, note-taking, giving oral presentations etc.

The most important part of successful study is to believe in yourself and your resourcefulness. Be aware of your strengths as well as weaknesses, and use accommodations as well as your strengths to compensate for any impairments.

What skills will I need at VET or uni?

You can develop these learning skills, through study skills courses, educational counsellors or learning skills advisors or study skills text books. Study support groups are also a great way to develop new skills.

In a post-secondary learning environment you will be expected to:

- focus and concentrate
- organise your tasks and your time
- listen to a class presentation/lecture
- take notes
- find information (library, internet, interviews)
- read critically and find key ideas
- infer information from textbooks and journals and utilise it in your essays/assignments
- understand academic and specialist terminology specific to the subject
- work with others on collaborative projects
- explore, imagine and elaborate ideas or content
- review, practise and rehearse, for exams
- organise notes, information and ideas for exams or assignments

- develop an argument and structure it logically in written assignments
- reason critically and solve problems
- present your written work professionally (ideally using word-processing and other software)
- give a verbal presentation to a small group
- ask questions in class without embarrassment

Some strategies for managing your study effectively

There are key strategies that may help you learn effectively; individuals all have different thinking and learning styles, so not all of these will work for you, but it's important to maintain control of your study time.

Plan your study time

Most students find it useful to plan study time, but it becomes much more important if you have a mental health impairment. It's also wise to allow for additional time than you might have allowed prior to your illness (some students suggest this may be up to double the study time).

- ✔ Set realistic, achievable goals.
- ✔ Keep a study timetable or plan (at the very least it will help you decide what's possible, building up to exams or assignment deadlines).
- ✔ Keep an assignment/test log—with assessment details (make sure you have complete-by dates as well as due dates—Murphy's Law dictates you will have several assignments due together!).
- ✔ Study when you are most alert (are you a morning or an evening person?).
- ✔ Give yourself regular breaks to avoid concentration lapses (during these breaks, go for a walk, make a coffee or watch a half-hour TV program).
- ✔ Use lists in your diary or on a whiteboard in your study (if you find you don't get through the list each day, then consider shorter lists (and ensure your list items are achievable, e.g. write an introduction rather than complete an essay).
- ✔ Reward yourself for completed tasks (a Mars bar, a favourite TV program, a game of tennis, a movie).

Adjust your plans, catch up or renegotiate timelines. Check your progress every week against the plan and review your wellbeing. Monitor any early warning signs and address your needs.

Persist through difficult study tasks. Don't give up—take a break, look for another way to tackle it, talk to another student about it, break down into steps and tick off each part when done. Look back at

your original goals, indulge in a daydream about your graduation or future career possibilities.

Ask for assistance when you are stuck. A tutor, an educational counsellor or learning advisor may suggest different strategies or teach you skills that are useful.

Ask for a subject tutor to be provided. As a last resort, pay for a private tutor. Universities usually have tutor registers.

Q **Having difficulty getting started?**

A *Try some of these strategies:*

- *Try telling yourself that you will only work for 15 minutes. That will be enough time to get a feel for what the task entails, and in most cases you'll find you can keep going.*
- *Read through your notes at the end of each day; take no more than half an hour, and avoid the temptation to rewrite (instead, underline, circle and add in some comments). Material you review in this way will stay in your memory more effectively and it ensures you have a regular daily task.*
- *Always start a task before dinner, even if it's only for a few minutes (otherwise you'll find a variety of excuses not to start after you're nicely relaxed by your evening meal).*

Some useful learning aids

Here are some strategies that other students have found useful. You might also consider taking a short computer course to improve your knowledge of the computer and how it can save you time.

- Use your computer's spell checker and grammar checker on word-processed documents.
- Investigate concept mapping software.
- Investigate voice-type software (which types from your voice).
- Use templates for assignments, essays, pracs to ensure that you use the appropriate structure.
- Use dictionary and English usage guides suited to your level; some people might find phonetic or 'bad spellers' dictionaries useful.
- Invest in a subject-specific terminology dictionary and a thesaurus.
- Some people find it easier to verbalise ideas than to write them down. If this sounds like you, try: keeping a tape recorder in your car to record ideas or to rehearse material for a test, plan an essay on tape, summarise notes or reading material on tape, then play it on a walkman or on your car tapedeck.
- Borrow tapes on relaxation for exam anxiety.
- Use colour to highlight key points (memory is 3-D and you'll find it easier to recall material this way).

- For the same reason, draw pictures, mindmaps, watch videos on the topic or career.
- Surf the net on the topic (studying doesn't have to be boring!).
- Ask your teacher for easier text books if you find the initial material too taxing.
- Prepare colourful summaries on cards (you can use these to revise on the train or in a bus queue).
- File your class notes and reading material in well-organised files.

Discover your preferred learning style

Individuals have different learning styles, and what works for someone else won't necessarily work for you. If you organise your study strategies around your preferred learning style you will find you study much more efficiently. Do you learn best visually, by hearing or by doing? Do you like working with people in groups or would you prefer to work alone? Are you a 'big picture' person or do you like to focus on detail? Do you like feeling sure of the facts before you start or are you happy to leave ideas open to change? There are no right or wrong answers to questions like this, but they can help you decide the most effective learning methods for you.

Check out the internet for some on-line learning styles inventories!

Is the subject/course too hard?

Sometimes a course is not what you expect or it may require prerequisite skills you don't have. You may need to consider some of the following options:

- Do you think that with extra time/help you could catch up?
- You can continue attending the classes without handing in the work. Some VET insitutions and universities will let you have an 'incomplete' rather than a 'fail' result.
- You can withdraw formally if it doesn't affect your Austudy or income support, and you don't need the subject.
- You can enquire about continuous assessment (or indefinite timeline), self-paced or flexible delivery modes of study, and negotiate for completion.
- Convert to lesser course load or notify of necessary break.
- Deferring your studies is sometimes a good option.
- Re-enrol for the subject next time it runs.
- Go part-time or take the course as an off-campus student.

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Don't worry about losing time, it may be that you will learn more thoroughly next time around, to your advantage. Give yourself a pat on the back for trying and learning something from the experience.

Special consideration arrangements

Special consideration is a procedure where the teaching department is required to consider special circumstances of the student which interfere with their educational progress, particularly at assessment time. There is usually a set of criteria which represent the special circumstances, such as:

- medical
- accident/incident
- loss
- family difficulties or duties
- disability/impairment (including mental health)
- English difficulties
- other unusual circumstances e.g. attendance of specialist
- personal reasons (e.g. severe stress, been harrassed)

You may wish to apply for special consideration, particularly when you haven't disclosed your mental health issue before and don't want to unless absolutely necessary.

If you are applying for a special consideration:

- ✔ Check the rules, obtain a special consideration form.
- ✔ Consult a doctor or counsellor as soon as possible.
- ✔ A student association officer can also help you frame the application.
- ✔ Indicate when you may be recovered or what variation you need.
- ✔ Lodge within the time limit (usually one to two days after an exam or test) or as soon as the circumstances are known.

Managing gaps in attendance

Because mental health issues can become more stressful at times, many students may need some time off studies to recover. This may range from a few days to several months, or longer. Careful arrangements need to be made by you or your support worker, so that your place in the course is maintained as far as possible, and your results are under your control (i.e. no fails).

The first option is to try to reduce your other activities which are not essential, such as going out, to minimise stress and allow more time to study.

If you (or others) recognise some early warning signs of extreme stress or another episode of illness, you can plan for some time off study to prevent a breakdown. This may be several days or even a semester's break. Let your support worker know you need time off studies and ask for non-attendance period from the course without penalty.

Disability staff may be able to help you in the following ways:

- arrange taping or note-taking of lectures
- copy of lecturer's overheads or notes
- assisting with book loans or returns
- arrange tutoring
- re-arrange assessment timelines
- arrange formal deferral if required.

You may ask the disability officer to follow you up if you are absent more than a few days, to keep in contact, to liaise with your therapist, or to let other students know that you are not well. Arrangements for catching up or options for deferment/continuation can be negotiated.

Ideally you would have indefinite time to complete the subjects without having to re-enrol for the same ones, but this may not always be possible. If you are not well enough to make decisions on what you need or want, ask for a 'hold' on decision-making until you are able to. It is important to know the timelines for last date for refunds, deferment or incomplete work but sometimes these may be renegotiated or varied.

Q **What should I do when I'm ready to come back after an absence?**

A *You may wish to re-start gradually, or go back to the previous workload. Ask your support worker to arrange a meeting with your course co-ordinator, and together go over the options of continuation. You may be able to skip some modules and redo them later, or arrange for an extension on missed assessments.*

Make a plan for catching up, or a new study plan. You may ask your course co-ordinator/teachers to talk to the class briefly about your return and to welcome you back, so that you feel included.

Your teachers can also inform you of their current place in the course content, what work you have missed and its importance, and what, if anything, is required of you. It's best to meet them for a 15–30 minute appointment individually so that you can clarify the situation in private.

How long can I be away and still catch up ?

This varies, of course, with the course, your study load, and how well you feel. Some students say it's about four weeks but a few say it could be longer. Often a semester or mid-semester break helps in giving you extra time without falling too far behind. However, it is

not easy to catch up fully if you had a full-time load and have been away for a few weeks. If the course content is non-sequential, you may make up the work at a later time, but if the content is sequential, it will be hard to understand the later content.

Q **What are my options if I can't catch up right now?**

- negotiate indefinite completion time or at least double time (if continuous assessment)
- convert to self-paced or flexible delivery for missed subjects
- deferment
- withdraw from missed subjects (but consider Austudy workload requirements)
- change course load to part-time

If you haven't disclosed your mental health impairment, this may be the time to do it, to get maximum course flexibility. Remember, all course rules can be adjusted, up to the point of unjustifiable hardship, so explore alternative ways of having your needs met.

Going on fieldwork placement

On fieldwork placement, you will be trying out your new knowledge and skills in a real work environment. Your employer will be legally responsible for you and your work, including your and others' safety. Again, you need to decide whether to disclose your mental health issues, so that you could draw upon extra resources or accommodations if you need to, or protect safety. A good way to introduce your mental health issue is by mentioning stress in the past. Your fieldwork co-ordinator may be able to suggest some accommodations to the employer (with your permission).

Remember that the first day or two are usually for observation or simple tasks.

Some tips:

- Don't be afraid to ask questions or repeat the question to know exactly what you are expected to do.
- Don't do anything you feel is unsafe.
- Get a good mentor who can guide you through the tasks, gradually increasing the complexity of the tasks, and give you balanced feedback.
- If stressed, ask for a break or for the task to be broken down into smaller steps.
- Debrief after the working day with your support worker, even if on the phone (not at work).
- Mix with other workers at breaks if possible.

- Identify what you find hard and whether it is necessary to carry it out that way.
- Note what you can do well and put it into words (and on paper).
- Raise any issues or concerns you have so they can be cleared up, at a daily meeting or at the end of the day.
- Remember, if you can't carry out all the 'inherent requirements' of the job at this time, it doesn't mean that you couldn't do so in the future, or that some employers couldn't redesign the job so as to make those requirements possible in the future.
- Think about what accommodations would make the job easier, and trial them if possible.
- Build in support into the placement, e.g. telephone or meet your support worker daily.
- Consider asking for a substitute activity if you can't stay in placement comfortably.

Job search

Most students are keen to find a job once they complete the course, but finding a job can be hard, especially if new in the field. Here are some suggestions.

While studying

- Plan with your career counsellor.
- Research your chosen career field at a career reference centre.
- Identify possible employers and employment agencies that cater for people with mental health issues.
- Find out what assets could increase your suitability (e.g. specific skills, computer skills, voluntary work, work experience, driver's licence) and carry them out during your semester breaks or after completion.
- Prepare your resumé by focussing on your functional skills if you don't have a lot of work experience and keep updating your resumé often.
- Start applying for targetted jobs six months before you plan to complete your course.
- Practise interview skills in a safe environment.
- Talk to a counsellor or case worker about your readiness to work and what you need to work on, e.g. your confidence.
- Consider what workload/hours you would prefer.

After completion of course

- Assess, or ask for an assessment, of your level of functioning. Use this to decide whether to disclose your mental health issues to the employer, when and how. Plan what accommodations could be helpful and how to ask for them.

- Seek out employment services that have some expertise in working with people with mental health issues, if needed.
- Do some voluntary work, to gain confidence and apply skills.
- Talk with career advisors about how to carry out a major job search campaign.
- Meet with other graduates for mutual support and share strategies.
- Tailor covering letters and meeting selection criteria to each position.
- Explore your existing contacts to their fullest, e.g. who could they refer you to?
- Talk to people who work in the field to gain useful tips and information on trends.

After getting a job

- Arrange for post-placement support, especially in the first three months.
- Find a mentor in the industry who is understanding and resourceful.
- Obtain feedback on job performance and correct gaps as far as possible.
- Re-negotiate accommodations if necessary.
- Ask the employment agency to educate the employer about mental health issues if necessary.
- Attend a support group for people returning to work.
- Consider an external advocate if there are major problems.
- Celebrate your success.

Other career options

If your initial employment options don't work out as you expect, consider trying the following options:

- starting your own business
- working from home
- job-sharing
- work exchange co-operatives
- volunteer work
- develop your hobby into expertise

We hope this guide has been of some help and wish you the best for your educational journey.